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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002246

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/FO, AF/W, AF/RSA, DRL, INR/AA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR NI

SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY AND OPPOSITION GROUPS IN NIGERIA'S
BENUE STATE VOICE PESSIMISM OVER PROSPECTS FOR 2011
ELECTIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor James P. McAnulty
for reasons in Sections 1.4. (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Representatives of civil society organizations and the opposition All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) expressed little hope for credible national elections in 2011 during a mid-November visit by PolOffs to Benue State in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Only officials from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) voiced any confidence that fair elections would occur. END SUMMARY.

CIVIL SOCIETY WORKS FOR CHANGE

¶12. (C) Church activists, working through the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and Center for Development and Social Justice (CEDASJ), expressed little to no confidence to PolOffs during a November 16-17 visit to Benue that the 2011 elections would be free and fair. Similarly, they voiced no confidence in the ability of the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) to run transparent elections, as demonstrated by their poor performance in the 2007 elections, which they characterized as far worse than those in 2003. JDPC published electoral reform recommendations in 2007, but noted that officials had neither considered nor implemented them. In voicing his frustration, CAN State Chairman Bishop Orkwar declared that the "people prefer democracy if our votes count, but, if not, military rule would be acceptable." JDPC Director Father Bernard Asogo indicated that his group met monthly with CAN to plan election oversight, monitoring, and observation strategies. (COMMENT: Church groups wield considerable influence in Benue, whose population is 90 percent Christian and overwhelmingly Catholic (70 percent). While the Tiv ethnic group predominates, public officials hail from various ethnic groups. The state does not suffer from any ongoing ethnic conflicts. END COMMENT.)

YOUTH HOLDS KEY

¶13. (C) Civil Society members uniformly cited youth unemployment and underemployment as potential sparks for civil unrest in Benue. According to Bishop Orkwar, the

state's only remaining manufacturing plant (for producing cement) supplies few jobs. While the agricultural sector provides the main source of income, it primarily entails small, family-run farms which do not employ persons outside their families. Bishop Orkwar explained that, during the August Youth Congress in Abuja, over 10,000 Catholic youth delegates voted to volunteer as 2011 election monitors, representing all states. Young people, who constitute the vast majority of Nigeria's population, have become more savvy, active, and dissatisfied with the status quo, the Bishop said. CEDASJ Director Dr. Simeon Iber, a Nigerian priest who formerly served as a parish priest in Port Huron, Michigan, noted that he leads a program aimed at voter registration and education among youth.

RULING PARTY ALONE EXPRESSES CONFIDENCE

¶15. (C) The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) state leadership expressed confidence about prospects for re-election of their candidates, since they considered public services to be satisfactory in Benue. Party stalwarts insisted that incumbent Governor Suswam (of the PDP) remained so popular that he would easily gain re-election in 2011. They proudly reported that their governor participated in their party's selection process for the gubernatorial candidate for the February 2010 election in nearby Anambra State. PDP, they said, remained the overwhelming, majority party in Benue State, holding 10 of 11 seats in the House

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and 25 of 29 seats in the Assembly. State Party Secretary Bem Dzoho confided that Suswam planned to vie for the party's presidential nomination in 2015.

ANPP OPPOSITION PLEADS FOR REFORM

¶16. (C) Some 35 ANPP senior party officials met with PolOff to communicate their dissatisfaction with the conduct of the 2007 elections. ANPP Chairman Godwin Ukpaju averred that most Nigerians believed that "no office holder was elected fairly" in the last national election. Insisting that they had remained patient to date, these opposition leaders warned that, if no change occurred in the 2011 elections, "widespread chaos" would ensue, with Nigeria becoming "the next Somalia with no central government." ANPP member Silas McIkpah predicted that "people will abandon the courts, if they cannot expect justice." Barrister Andrew Wombo, who ran as a 2007 ANPP candidate for a seat in the House of Representatives, claimed that he still did not know how many votes he actually received, given that authorities never published the final vote count. In 2007, he said, uniformed military and police personnel collected the ballots and frightened citizens from coming out to vote, even though, he said, "there is no constitutional role for the military in elections." Benue ANPP officials complained that "INEC is the obvious problem," arguing that INEC membership should come from non-partisan, civil society groups, as a prerequisite for free and fair elections.

¶18. (C) Benue interlocutors clamored for the U.S. to continue to press GON officials to reform the country's elections. They noted strong support from civil society organizations and the opposition party for the Secretary's strong statements on electoral reform during her visit last August to Abuja. Interlocutors recommended establishing sanctions, pressing for INEC reform, joining other foreign governments in observing elections, emphasizing voter education, and offering training to candidates and campaign staffs to ensure free

and fair elections.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Although national elections are still 16 months away, our interlocutors were already tightly focused on electoral preparations and prospects. It is not surprising that opposition figures would decry the electoral system and that incumbents would praise it, but is a long distance to travel to achieve a credible a credible outcome and to dent the widespread cynicism about the status quo.

SANDERS